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AGE OF QUARREL

A RALEIGH PUNK LABEL'S HUMBLE HOSTILITY by Bryan C. Reed

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Raleigh's Abuse, launches into the inaugural To Live A Lie Records Fest at In The Groove Records.

PHOTO BY ADAM DAVID KISSICK

LIFETIME GRIND

As its owner matures, so do the motives driving the Raleigh punk label To Live A Lie Records

BY BRYAN C. REED

THE SIMPLE FAÇADE OF WILL BUTLER'S RALEIGH HOME does not betray the hardcore punk that foments just inside.

The 30-year-old Butler is an employee of N.C. State University, where he helps manage the school's digital security. He lives in this cozy, three-bedroom house just outside of downtown Raleigh with his girlfriend, Brittany, and their dog, Barnabas. The exterior is emblematic of the American Dream, with a wooden fence running the length of the lawn and a brick stoop leading the way upward to twin planters.

But the Jetta in the driveway sports several bumper stickers—one advertises the brutal band Charles Bronson, and another proudly proclaims "Vegan." That's the only hint that, inside, the dual upstairs bedrooms serve as the operational hub for To Live A Lie Records, a decade-old stronghold for the most extreme offshoots of hardcore punk. Since 2005, Butler has built a strong catalog of grindcore, powerviolence and fastcore—subgenres whose very names suggest the

damage the music intends to do.

One bedroom overflows with stacks of boxes filled with records or their accompanying sleeves. Each package is assembled, by hand, when orders arrive. The catalog includes bands from as far away as Australia and Japan; the people ordering them are as far-flung. The other room serves as an office and a storage facility for titles that Butler helps sell from other like-minded labels, again based around the world.

This year, Butler will release To Live A Lie's 100th title, a 29-track survey featuring punk heavyweights like Weekend Nachos alongside relatively unknown locals such as Abuse, and the short-lived Mad Dog. Its strength, and the fact that a hobbyist label has survived to reach 100 albums, is a testament to the brand Butler has built and the care he has put into it. But while the label has proven successful, especially in how it has affected its niche audience, Butler has grown up, and perhaps out, of his hobby.

"I think at 30," he says, sitting upstairs at his desk, "I'm wondering if I should be doing more for my own life."

Trying to balance personal relationships and responsibilities, a career and a mortgage with an all-consuming hobby can be a challenge, Butler admits. Retiring the imprint would have instant benefits.

"It'd be the answer to all of my problems," he says. "It'd be like, 'Don't do the record label anymore,' and all of a sudden I have free time. I could probably be better at my current job and be more attentive to friends and family and stuff."

Indeed, Butler's current job is the best one he's ever had, not something he's willing to quit for the risk of running a label full-time. To get a small breather, he's occasionally closed his mail-order site and planned fewer releases. But despite his best intentions to slow To Live A Lie down, there has never been a shortage of activity. Even as his hair thins and his beard gains gray flecks and

streaks, Butler's bright-eyed enthusiasm for this sideline remains clear. He has a hard time even imagining letting the label go.

"That room," he says, referring to the bedroom stacked with boxes of new releases awaiting assembly, "is probably the worst it's ever been. At one point it was almost empty. Maybe it'll be a lifetime thing."

Butler already qualifies as a lifer: He grew up skateboarding in Winston-Salem. The sport introduced him to punk. His tastes soon evolved from Green Day and The Offspring to its more caustic subgenres. "Some people gravitate towards street punk or Oi! or whatever. I heard Charles Bronson and Spazz pretty early on," he says, referring to two highly influential mid-'90s powerviolence bands. "I just got interested in that."

After he embarked to N.C. State for school in 2001, Butler became involved in the local DIY scene. He founded Stronghold Distro as an outlet to sell records that were hard to find in local shops to his friends. He populated his inventory with screamo titles and others that more closely matched his own hardcore predilections. More

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important, Butler made the connections that would enable him to start his own imprint through Stronghold. He took the name To Live A Lie from his handle on AOL Instant Messenger, an indication of the era that spawned the label.

In August 2005, To Live A Lie Records debuted with a release divided between Maryland's Magrudergrind and California's Godstomper. He then found the band Rhino Charge on MySpace, got in touch and got lucky; the influential zine *Heartattack* interviewed the band. The 7-inch effort sold through two pressings, a major feat for any such label, new or otherwise.

"I was trying to connect more with music in general," Butler says. "I think most people that go to punk shows are into the music itself, and if you're not in a band you don't feel as immersed in it. This was my way of trying to help out and be more of a part of it."

Punk has clearly set a template for Butler. He's vegan, straight-edge, an avid cyclist, all evidenced by his lean frame. "Punk is subversive at the heart, right? It is out of the box," he says. "You can apply your own logic rather than following the status quo. I'd like to say that I apply the same set of glasses to most anything I do."

That mentality guides To Live A Lie's daily operations, too. Leaning back into his chair with his arms folded across his chest, obscuring the logo of his Curmudgeon T-shirt, Butler is modest and soft-spoken, but not defeatist or self-deprecating in the way that punk's ingrained anti-commercialism often dictates. He's simply comfortable with his company's limited means.

To wit, To Live A Lie's prices are cost conscious, providing just enough profit to cover costs and keep the label running. Any surplus is funneled back into the label. If there's an overage in shipping charges, Butler tries to refund the difference. Butler operates the business at a loss, in part to protect against an audit, but also because his mission is more about promotion and

documentation than profit. His entire catalog is available, at least in part, on Bandcamp. He posts demos and other low-key releases through a complementary "net label" and duplicates those efforts on Archive.org.

"I could be organized and do this better and try to make money, but that's not where my head is," he says. "If I can keep running on crossed fingers, then I'll do it."

Despite Butler's ambivalence to profit (and, at least in some ways, because of it), his business has been successful.

"For what I do, I think it's pretty big to other people," he says. "I'm glad I'm doing something big to help out music that I like."

Without exception, all four bands offered their kudos to Butler, correctly assuming that his first name would be sufficient: "Thanks to Will," they'd say simply. While releasing local music has never been Butler's chief priority, he has ingratiated himself with the local punk scene and become an incidental catalyst for it. He's an avid documentarian, capturing photos and videos for his own zine and website. He occasionally signs local bands, too. Just last year, the label released two area LPs, debuts from the already-defunct Last Words and the very-much-active Abuse.

Ira Rogers played drums on Butler's first major local breakthrough, a 7-inch record by

Locally, Raleigh hardcore is more closely aligned with To Live A Lie's aesthetic than in many years before. Mad Dog, which appears on To Live A Lie's forthcoming compilation, skewed toward the streamlined bursts and scabrous textures of power violence. Last Words favored speed and ferocity. The new band Skemata keeps its hardcore lean and angry, and a nebulous outfit featuring Rogers on drums promises a dark and complex approach to the genre. Alongside the opening of Sorry State, a new punk-centered store in Raleigh, Butler has helped prove that there's a local audience for his favored sounds. It's unlikely that will recede any time soon, either. If Butler were

more business-minded, he might tout how his brand has gained equity among his target demographics, how he's developed something of an area presence. But that's not how he operates.

"I think of it more like you're curating something," he says. "It's all kind of saying the same thing, but it seems nicer to think of it as curating. Like, there's this thing I really like and it's here, it's all together in a collection."

Ultimately, the label is an extension of that and punk's implicit command to be an active participant, not merely a fan. All

this points, at least indirectly, to Butler's activism on behalf of his music. The videos he records are posted on YouTube, Vimeo and Archive.org, too. He remembers how hard it could be to hear these extreme subgenres before the Internet bloomed, and this—just like offering some of his releases on Bandcamp for free—is his way of helping.

"Most of the people I know who go to shows have booked a show themselves," he offers. "This was my way of trying to help out and be more of a part of it."

A decade in, that's what keeps To Live A Lie in business. "Ever since I was 16, I wanted to do something someone cared about," Butler says.

Some things, even as they age, never change. ▲



Kicking and screaming: At left, Assholeparade performs at the inaugural To Live A Lie Records Fest. At right, the crowd explodes as D.C.'s Genocide Pact starts.

PHOTOS BY ADAM DAVID KISSICK

On a recent sunny Sunday, Butler hosted the inaugural To Live A Lie Records Fest at In The Groove Records, a used vinyl shop in a basement on Raleigh's Glenwood Avenue. The festival was equal parts happy coincidence—joint headliners Sex Prisoner and Assholeparade happened to be touring simultaneously—and record label milestone, a celebration of the imprint's centennial release.

More than 50 people filled the basement, spilling onto the sidewalk between the short sets. In the second slot, the hometown grindcore band Abuse, whose debut LP To Live A Lie recently released, exploded into an 11-minute burst. The mosh pit ignited immediately—dancers stomping, fists swinging, bodies tossing. By the end of the set, singer Alex Taylor had a divot in his scalp. He'd repeatedly bashed himself with the broken microphone.

the short-lived Raleigh group Thieves. "He's a humble and behind-the-scenes influence on Raleigh hardcore in general," Rogers says. "When I started booking shows, he was one of the connections I had to several high-quality touring bands. He's helped a lot as far as documenting the history of Raleigh hardcore."

In general, the state of hardcore has rarely been more favorable for To Live A Lie, despite Butler's misgivings about his own age, time and lifestyle. The mainstream press has showered bigger hardcore acts like Fucked Up and White Lung with praise. Traditional metal outlets such as Southern Lord have turned attention again toward the intersections of punk and metal. Sex Prisoner, whose first releases arrived via To Live A Lie, recently inked a deal with the in-vogue metal label A389 Records.

Bryan C. Reed lives in Raleigh. He's written about music for INDY Week since 2008.